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19th Century Californiana:

Tales Of Catalina's Two Harbors

by Elyse Mintey

Perhaps of all the coves at Santa Catalina Island, the Isthmus and its western sister Catalina Harbor, are the most romantic, darkly historic and exciting. They have been veritable outposts of island "civilization" from the mid-1800s to date—a fact still enjoyed by Southern California cruisers of all persuasions.

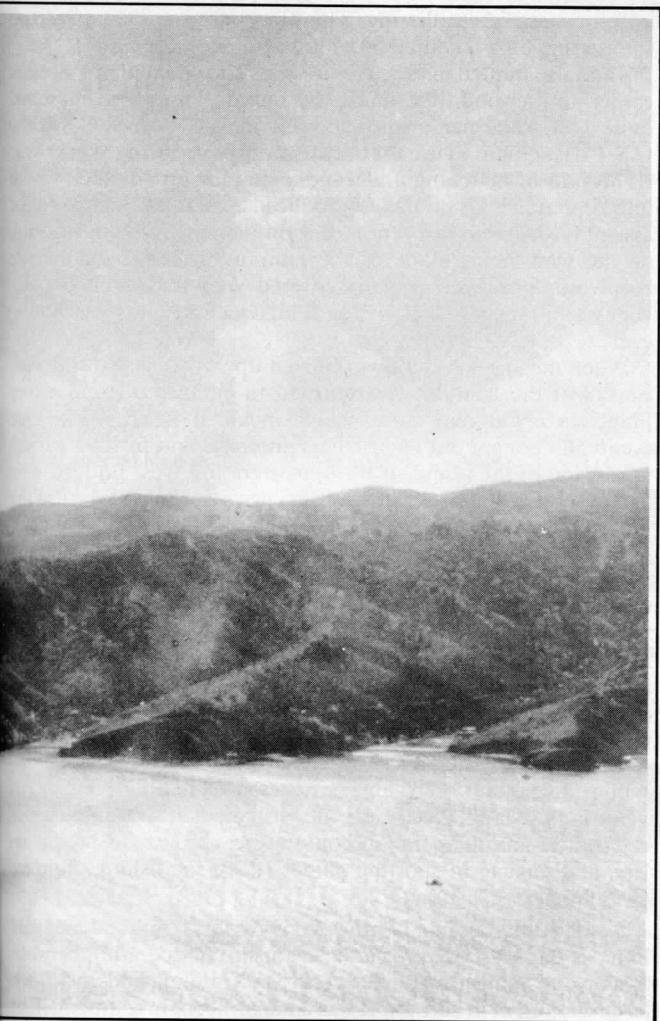
To "Catalina regulars" (once-a-month visitors to moorage owners) these coves are the reasonable retreats, the most sheltered waters of the island. Indisputably, the most distinctive geographic feature of Catalina Island is the sag in its fault-uplifted backbone, the Isthmus, located out toward West End. It divides the island unevenly into two different cruising realms and has been a special place for many years. It has attracted frontier traders, Chinese labor smugglers, the Union Army, yachtsmen, film makers and the United States Coast Guard . . . among others.

Perhaps the first mention (in English) of Two Harbors, as it is frequently called, was found in the logbooks of American trading vessels.

In 1804, the *Lelia Byrd*, Capt. William Shaler commander, pulled into Catalina Harbor after a voyage to China. It had been quickly determined that this was the only all-weather anchorage at the island and Shaler, believing himself the first explorer to find it, named it Port Roussillion, in honor of a partner in his transpacific enterprise.

The ship was badly in need of a refit, so it remained there for six weeks. Shaler was en route to the western trade centers of Mexico's Alta California and hoped to add otter pelts and other furs to his already luxurious cargo.

Although the Mexicans made use of Santa Catalina from the early 17th Century, trading with the Indians, shipping them to the mainland as converts or for laborers in the missions and taking shelter from prevailing conditions, they had not con-



The Isthmus, flanked by its Two Harbors, was once the site of wild fandangos, and bear vs. bull fights.

From the Civil War barracks grounds, Catalina Harbor looks much as it has since the 19th Century.



Richard Gross photo

structed land bases in the western extremes of the island.

The Isthmus was utilized regularly as a great trading center and fiesta location. It was a stage for the passing of the Mexican mission and rancho era, which went out in a blaze of glory. Typical is the story of a fandango held by governor Pio Pico in 1846.

The practice of evading the Mexican customs officers brought Californios from Los Angeles and Santa Barbara to trade hides (which were salted and stacked on the Isthmus fields) and pelts for the goods shipped in by Yankee traders. Meat roasted in huge barbecue pits. The miners came down from the Catalina hillsides. A fierce bull and a giant grizzly bear were corraled for a fight to the death. The air was filled with the scents of the meat and dust and the sounds of music and laughter of the party.

This formed a colorful, if forboding backdrop for what was to be Pio Pico's last official act as governor of Alta California. He sensed that time was running out on him and at this gathering, deeded the island to his friend Thomas Robbins, a rancher from Santa Barbara, for a horse and a saddle.

Romantic? Certainly. Prophetic? Yes.

Two years hence, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had sealed the fate of Catalina. There were no more Indians, no more fandangos at the Isthmus. Instead, schooners like the *Hazard*, Capt. James Roway commander, and 50 men, with 22 guns of 9- and 12-lb. caliber and 20 swivel guns on deck were seen more frequently than the Mexican ships from the coast of New Spain.

After some struggle, California came under United States rule and the history of Catalina Island shifted gears.

A coasting trade began to take hold and trading or cargo vessels like the *Tamana*, the schooner *Alexander*, the *O'Cain*, the *Aser*, or the bark *Danube*, would show Catalina Harbor in their logs.

Because this was a desolate coast and hardships forced piracy,

robbing of the missions and the importation of contraband, the offshore islands were frequently used as hideouts. Often the Isthmus aided and abetted outlaws.

In 1855 the issuance of the "China Boy Laws" to prohibit further importation of Chinese laborers caused a few "deportation" ships to be offloaded between San Francisco and San Diego at Catalina Harbor. The vessels would then re-enter territorial waters without having to pay the \$50 per head fee on unwanted immigrants. Supposedly, the Chinese held on the island were afforded considerable freedom, evidenced by trails all over the West End and from Mt. Torquemada to Cat Harbor.

The unscrupulous continued this practice until the arrival of the San Francisco Infantry in 1864, whereupon, headquarters were shifted to San Clemente Island.

Over the years, the Isthmus also was a collecting place for resident characters.

These individuals ran a colorful gamut of prospector/treasure hunters, ranchers and recluses. Many lived in lee-side harbors near Isthmus Cove and some lived on the west side, out toward Little Harbor.

Among the first to "settle" in this part of the island was Samuel Prentiss, a shipwreck survivor off the bark *Danube*, which went ashore in San Pedro during a vicious Santana. Prentiss established permanent residence at Johnson's Landing (Emerald Cove). He and shipmate Louis Bouchette located and excavated silver mines at Cherry Cove, Parson's Landing and Johnsons (Emerald).

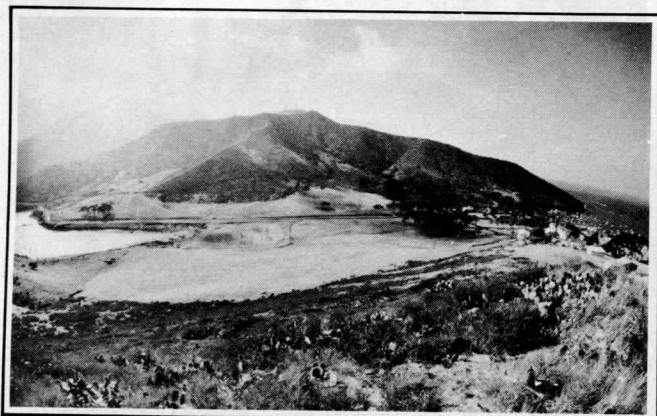
While living in Los Angeles, Prentiss had befriended a Catalino Indian at Mission San Gabriel who told him of his tribe's hidden treasure, buried somewhere on West End. The story was that the Indian, named Turei, had buried the valuable property of his tribe just before they were all taken off the island to the mission in 1823. Rumor has it that this humble Indian stash also contained "loot and plunder" stolen from wealthy Mexican missions in Baja California in 1804 and which had never been recovered. ➔

Apparently the existence of this treasure was part of his reason for staying on the island, but he was never specific about his "search" until shortly before his death, in 1854. Supposedly, he told Santos Bouchette, the son of his *Danube* shipmate, that he was indeed trying to recover it for his friend and the tribe.

At the time Bouchette lived in a house at Johnson's, so he remained and continued the search while promoting the silver mines his father had started. He stayed on here until 1876, profiting from further mining efforts.

Another set of "West Enders" of the era was Captain Charles A. Wilson and his father, Spencer, who supposedly followed Bouchette around, looking for the elusive treasure. They lived a generally quiet life, and Spencer was allowed to stay on the island in 1864 when the Civil War sent the Union Army to establish an outpost at the Isthmus.

At that time, he ran a herd of 12,000 sheep, 10 cattle and cut firewood for sale. Capt. Charles is quoted in some Catalina history as saying that the Isthmus offered the best shark fishing around, as well it might; its sand bottom, relatively shallow depth



Richard Gross photo

Catalina's most outstanding geographical formation also marks the two best harbors on the island.

and comparative warmth make a great shark nursery. Wilson lived in a cabin at the Isthmus until his death in 1918.

Besides treasure hunters, there lived a few earnest stockmen, eking out a living from the rangeland available on the weather side of the island. William Howland, living at Howland's Landing since 1858, ran 3000 head of sheep. Benjamin Weston, whose cabin sat on the brow of a hill overlooking Little Harbor and what is now called Ben Weston Beach, had 2000 sheep; Johan Behn, a German and his Spanish wife, had a house and small farm at Johnson's Landing and Swain Lawson, who operated a small sailing vessel around the island from Avalon to West End, had 10 cattle on the range near Catalina Harbor.

Noting the size and aridity of Catalina today, you'll perhaps know why much of the land is bare. Between herds of close-grazing animals and the need for firewood, there was little flora to spare as time went by.

But with the advent of war, Catalina was no longer considered an outpost, it was part of California. As the only all-weather harbor among the offshore islands, the Isthmus was indeed in need of fortification.

The Fourth California Infantry, Lt. Col. James F. Curtis commanding, inventoried the West End inhabitants then moved the "roughnecks" out. Those prospectors and no-last-name characters who hung out in the hills were collected with only a few ranchers being allowed to remain in business.

The soldiers constructed barracks and set up a tent encampment for stores, etc. For the war years and several more thereafter, Isthmus Cove was known as Union Harbor.

The actual impact of the war was slight in Southern California and for weeks on end, there was little going on at Union Harbor. The troops functioned as lookouts and were industrious about their headquarters. They sunk a well near the barracks and built a windmill for it. The apparatus is still in evidence, as are the barracks. The reddish-colored building is wood—its paint usually

in some state of weathering. The pump housing is grayed and splintering, only a couple of windmill blades remain.

They also hunted many of their meals and spent plenty of time gathering firewood, but, being the military, they also marched quite a bit. Their parade ground was still smooth enough for the U.S. Coast Guard to use for the same purpose during World War II. Months of marching under orders to pick up any rock which interrupted one's footfall had produced a smooth, clean field for assembly, drill and inspection. It is on the north side of the gap, on the west-facing slope of the Isthmus. It is flanked by the eucalyptus grove and usually covered with knee-high grasses. Today it still suggests a marching field, if viewed with a discerning eye.

When the encampment was broken up at the close of the war, control of the Isthmus was returned to its owners, then a San Francisco investment group which included James Lick. Lick eventually bought out his partners' interests and in 1872 gained possession of the island. It was a new era for West Enders, who had proclaimed homesteaders' rights just prior to and during the war. Lick proceeded to evict them all.

By 1887 Lick had sold to George Shatto and C.A. Sumner, but as development went on in Avalon, the Isthmus languished. The Chinese labor market, slowed by the transfer of headquarters to San Clemente Island, picked up again briefly. It is said that the *Ning Po*, the wreck on the south beach of Cat Harbor, was involved. Supposedly built in 1773 out of camphorwood, with no nails, it was said to have been one of the fastest ships in Chinese waters.

At the same time, investors, concessionaires, steamship companies and others were able to foresee incredible recreational value in the island, specifically the settlement at Avalon, to which the owners and their friends could retire, count their profits on-site, and engage in sporting games (deep-sea fishing, hunting, swimming and yachting).

By 1891 the Banning family of Los Angeles (railroad magnate Phineas Banning already had a steamship in operation between Avalon and San Pedro) gained control of Catalina and undertook its development in earnest. It was a magnificent investment, from which the family profited mightily, but which also gave them some financial headaches.

In the late 1890s, their way of managing a city didn't rest well with some residents, businessmen, steamship operators and organized labor. There was soon to be friction in Avalon.

The Isthmus and Cat Harbor at this time were still outstations, but visited regularly by hunting parties. The story here doesn't really change again until after the end of this retrospective period. But to illustrate, things were beginning to heat up further in Avalon during 1909, when Judge J. B. Banning decided to build his Colonial style home on the southern hillside of the Isthmus, overlooking both Isthmus Cove and Cat Harbor. There was considerable debate in the Banning group as to whether or not they should develop the Isthmus as their prime resort townsite. Many of their loyal Avalon followers were ready to move, but "anti-corporate government" factions raised considerable opposition to this. They also objected to the style in which Avalon and the island's profits were being dispensed. (Also the prevailing weather caused much greater variance in the climate in these coves, making it less-than-perfect for tourist tastes.)

This distraction was enough. The Bannings retreated to Avalon. The Isthmus was to remain the great getaway spot for the judge, and later, for others including pleasure boat people, hunters and outdoorsmen.

Today a balance has been maintained between the inevitable visitor traffic and commercial use of the area, the conservationist's need for preservation of a fragile ecological region and the scientific community which wants to study and probe the ocean and excavate the island here.

Slow years of conquest and the 19th Century's growing pains are long submerged in the early years of the South Coast. The Pacific frontier had a lot of rough edges on it through the 1800s and those years at Catalina Island were, in their own right, wild and wooly and certainly original.